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# Epistemological Matters Matter for Theological Understanding

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# At the Intersection

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# At the Intersection

Where Philosophy and Theology Meet

Edited by DANIEL J. FICK  
and JESSE K. MILEO

Foreword by R. J. SNELL

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AT THE INTERSECTION  
Where Philosophy and Theology Meet

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## EPISTEMOLOGICAL MATTERS MATTER FOR THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING<sup>1</sup>

JOSEPH LAPORTE

You could understand the philosophical discipline of epistemology to be the study of how to *think properly about the world*—as we typically take people to do when we say they are right-thinking, right-headed, or sensible. I'll survey a couple of important connections between this field of epistemology, on the one hand, and theology, on the other. The connections concern two discrete epistemological areas, whose distance one from another helps to indicate the great variety in areas of mutual interest for epistemologists and theologians. My goal is not to bridge the two discrete epistemological areas: each will have its own section. And I make no claims to comprehensiveness in discussing either area. My goal is just to fire the imagination, in order to draw readers more-or-less new to epistemology (or theology) into further study; but I hope that there will be matter here even for those who claim authority in both epistemology and theology.<sup>2</sup>

1. Thanks to Emily, Philip, and especially Michael, who keeps up the pressure. Thanks also to colleagues Curtis Gruenler and Andrew Dell'Olio.

2. I'll cite sparingly to two ends: both in order to (i) whet intuitions and pique interest by leading readers to see connections to traditions and literature with which they may be already familiar, and in order to (ii) show readers where to go to pursue a topic further.

The first topic concerns what it is for a belief to be rational or warranted, as opposed to irrational or otherwise epistemically wanting. The second topic concerns an interesting contrast between different ways one might know the same topic.

### 1. IS CHRISTIAN BELIEF GULLIBLE? THE PASTAFARIAN THREAT.

Perhaps you have heard of Pastafarianism. According to this silly farce, “The Flying Spaghetti Monster did come unto” the prophet Aunt Dee Dee,

waiting at the front of Fred’s Italian Corner, for she was hungry  
and her wait did seem to be unending, and he filled her with His  
Heavenly Smells, and unto her He did speak . . .<sup>3</sup>

If you believed that, you’d have a kooky belief. You should not believe kooky things. *Christian* belief is relevantly *similar*, with respect to evidence. So Christian belief is kooky, too. So you have every reason to reject Christian belief.

How convincing is this argument? Something along its lines is certainly widely popular. Wikipedia links several satirical parodies with a similar moral that have gone culturally viral. These include belief in a pink, invisible unicorn and belief in Bertrand Russell’s teapot orbiting between Earth and Mars: Russell is quoted as proclaiming “the Christian God just as unlikely.”<sup>4</sup> Similar polemic has since burgeoned, with “the New Atheism” that has made inroads into the culture, or at least brought the culture’s latent sympathy into the open. The New Atheism marches under the banner of science and sophistication. Bigwigs and bestsellers of the movement (Dawkins, Harris, and so on) are well-known and easily accessed. The main message of the New Atheistic group is that believing in the Gospel is fantastically *gullible*. So is believing in any religious revelation, perhaps even believing in God.

What well-known gullibility-chargers don’t much acknowledge is that Christian epistemologists have articulated important *responses* to the

3. These are the first lines of the first page Google turns up today under ‘Pastafarianism’: <http://www.loose-canon.info/page53.html> (accessed July 10, 2014).

4. The attribution is plausible and in the same spirit of Russell and the movement I now identify. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell%27s\\_teapot#cite\\_note-garvey-2](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell%27s_teapot#cite_note-garvey-2) (accessed July 10, 2014).

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charges. The conclusion of these responses, which are developed with great subtlety and power, is that the charges of gullibility are unconvincing. My purpose in this section is to introduce the reader to one Christian response to the gullibility charge. This response seems promising and accessible, at least in its outlines, to the intelligent laity and professional academics of other fields. The response that I will distill from the literature seems to harmonize with all of the main lines of thinking on the issue in the Christian tradition of epistemology. The best spokesperson at present for the response is the distinguished epistemologist Alvin Plantinga, whose work I will quickly sketch. The reader will think of a number of objections to Plantinga's response quickly—too quickly. Most objections springing readily to mind are misunderstandings. I will address such misunderstandings, in an attempt to clarify the main idea. Then I'll situate the main epistemological idea with respect to familiar claims of a couple of venerable Christian traditions.

Plantinga's main point, which goes back to Thomas Reid and, arguably, to Aquinas and earlier, is that we *know* something to be so if and only if our *belief* that it is so, is produced in the manner in which it was *designed* to be produced. In that case, we don't merely *believe*; we really know. Our belief is *warranted*—or, alternatively: right-headed, sensible, respectable, rational in the sense of being a good assessment of reality by someone in his right mind, or whatnot. Our belief is not crackpot or kooky or gullible or such that anyone in his right mind would be ashamed to have it, because again (and somewhat roughly), it is properly produced by *an agent whose cognitive faculties are functioning as they are supposed to function*.

So consider your belief that your friend is looking at you over his cup of coffee, as you sit in a café. Do you *know* it? That depends. If your coffee has been spiked with a hallucinogen, and if the reason that you think you have a friend looking at you is because you're hallucinating that Ronald McDonald is winking and smiling at you, his friend, over a cup, then you don't really have warrant here—you don't *know* that your friend is looking at you over his cup of coffee. The problem is not that you *don't* really have any friend looking at you—i.e., the problem is not that your belief is *untrue*. You might really *have* an alarmed friend somewhere in the café, who has just noticed you staring off into space. But you don't *know* that you have a friend looking at you. Your belief is unwarranted.

In the normal case of forming such a belief (“my friend is looking my way over his cup”), you'd be fine. Your coffee would not be spiked. You'd

just be enjoying yourself at a café, and you *would* know that your friend is looking at you. You'd be looking his way, the light would be entering your eyes, making the right impression on the right neurons, activating the right connections in your neural network, to form the belief that your friend is looking at you. This is how you're designed to take in information like this. You're forming this belief just the way you're supposed to. So you're rational, warranted, right-headed.

I've been talking in the abstract about what it *takes* in general for you to have knowledge or warrant, for you to be in your right mind instead of being out-of-it, irrational, wacky, kooky, etc. How does belief in the Gospel measure up, or belief in God? Well, let's *take for granted* at the moment that the Gospel is true. So we're supposing *God* has *created* you, in his own image, to have knowledge of him. And God has sent the Holy Spirit to move you to assent to the truth of the Gospel (by hypothesis) as you recite the Nicene Creed, say. *In that case*, you are *rational* in proclaiming the words of the Creed. You can even be said to have *knowledge*—you're operating just as you were made to operate, in these circumstances, by hypothesis. You're warranted. And your belief is not, after all, kooky, wacky, irrational, unwarranted. Something similar applies to your belief in God.

Fine, you say: maybe my beliefs are rational *if* the Christian story is true—my beliefs are rational by *hypothesis*. But that's taking a lot for granted! Can we just *assume*, by hypothesis that we are made in God's image, as Christianity maintains? Isn't that begging the whole question? Isn't it trying to *prove* that Christianity is true by *assuming* it is true? Something like this objection will come to your mind soon after you've understood Plantinga's position, if you're typical. The objection has a satisfying answer.

The satisfying answer cannot be understood unless we understand the point of Plantinga's project. Plantinga's project is not an *offensive* one; it is a *defensive* one. A Christian should not appeal to her own cognitive operation according to design in order to *prove* to the New Atheist that her Christian belief is true and therefore warranted and rational. It is at this point that the expected, familiar Christian strategy against nonbelief, however valid it may be in its own right, can distract us and make it harder to understand what's going on, by predisposing us to hear what we expect to hear. The familiar Christian strategy is to argue that Christianity is *true*;

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but that's *not* what's going on here.<sup>5</sup> If we *can* show that Christianity is true, showing that isn't part of *this* project. For all that we need to say here, it's the Holy Spirit's job to get us to see that Christianity is true, period. It's not that you have to believe that final statement, and so end your account of Christian apologetics as a *whole* here, with that period; instead, you'll probably insist that *humans* have an important role to play, in *helping* to move hearts and minds to assent to the Gospel. Granted. But that isn't relevant to what's going on here, in this paper (or this section of it). Perhaps Christians are to carry out an "offensive," so to speak, by testimony, or perhaps through stories, or perhaps through suggestive arguments, or perhaps even through conclusive arguments starting from neutral premises to the effect that Christianity is true. But set all that aside. It only shows there's more to a full account of Christian apologetics than the defensive strategy at issue here. What more there is, however thin or rich, doesn't matter for our purposes. With or without the rest, and however the rest is to be understood, the project here remains: it is the *purely defensive* project of showing that believers have been given *no convincing reason to buckle* to the atheist's objections—whether or not Christianity is true.

The *New Atheist*—not the Christian epistemologist—is the one on the offensive, so far as issues relevant here are concerned. The New Atheist is on the attack, trying to convince Christians that their belief is kooky, irrational, unwarranted, wildly speculative or arbitrary (like Aunt Dee Dee's). Further, the *New Atheist* is the one *begging the question*—not the Christian epistemologist sharing Plantinga's idea. The New Atheist thinks she has the Christian in a bind: her accusation is,

you can't show how your belief is more rational than some kook's belief in a flying spaghetti monster. For all you can tell, it isn't any different. For all you can tell, all supposedly divine testimony is a delusion or confusion of some sort. So *your* belief is kooky because

5. Plantinga ends his massive volume (*Warranted Christian Belief*, 499) by asking whether the model of God's operating in the world according to the Christian tradition, which model he's been assuming hypothetically to hold all along in order to argue for a correlative warrant, is true. But he can't settle whether the model is true, to the satisfaction of his opponents. His aim, he reminds the reader, has been:

to clear away certain objections, impedances, and obstacles to Christian belief. Speaking for myself and of course not in the name of philosophy, I can say only that it does, indeed, seem to me to be true, and to be the maximally important truth.

it's unestablished. It's out-on-a-limb. It's without any solid basis or credentials. It's like Aunt Dee Dee's belief.

The defensive parry to the charge ("not convincing") is that in order to have any claim on the Christian, you have to establish first that her Christian belief is *false*. Only if the Christian story is false can you go on to establish that therefore the belief is without solid epistemic credentials. If in fact the belief is true, then it's got *excellent* epistemic credentials, because it's produced, like your typical visual belief that your friend is before you at the café, by proper function.<sup>6</sup> That's just the sort of belief the café patron or the Christian is *supposed* to form, respectively, if she's working properly, in the circumstances.

The atheist is entitled to her *own* Naturalist Hypothesis (or other anti-Christian hypothesis), according to which Naturalism is true. She can argue that *if her* hypothesis is true then Christian belief is *not* inspired by any alleged Holy Spirit and accordingly not produced by way of God's design. But to *show* not (hence, gullibility), you can't just *assume* not. The Christian won't be talked out of her story, which the New Atheist has entertained by hypothesis, merely by a counter-story that the atheist can ask the Christian in turn to assume by hypothesis.

Seldom does the New Atheist try to take the bull by the horns and show from the start that Christian belief is false and that we aren't operating properly in forming Christian belief, probably because that is a very hard thing to establish. In my own experience, the most tempting efforts at proceeding tend to drift back into question-begging ways of assuming that the Christian's take on this or that feature of the world is kooky and not formed by design.

I've given a whirlwind tour of Plantinga's reply to the New Atheism. I have left alone, for the sake of space, any discussion of what science establishes, or whether it harmonizes with Christian belief or jars against it. For details and extensions like these, I refer the reader to Plantinga's terrific

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6. Similar words apply if we replace talk about *truth* with talk about *probability*. The New Atheist might say that she only has to show that Christian belief is improbable, not that it's false. Reply: improbable in some sort of objective respect (e.g., "three out of four balls in this urn is red")? If Christian belief is true, then the relevant probability is very high (100%, because it's just true, not mostly true or true most of the time or in most cases). So you have to establish falsity before you can establish that. If the relevant probability is epistemic, as seems more likely, then the charge is that Christian belief is in some way unreasonable, implausible, something not to be bet on, etc.; but that's just another variant of the charge that it's irrational, with which we've been dealing all along.

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work. I recommend *Warranted Christian Belief* and *Where the Conflict Really Lies*. Plantinga has other *Warrant* books, but they're better suited for other epistemologists than for the intelligent laity.

What's left for this section is to situate Plantinga's line with respect to salient Christian traditions—however cursorily. Plantinga began calling his work “*Reformed Epistemology*” and it's still often discussed as such. But the parts I've discussed, at least, are certainly compatible with, say, Catholic tradition. There are a couple salient sticking points.

First, many of the specifics about just *how* God in his providence has designed us to form Christian or theistic belief will have to be adapted to different faith traditions (is it by way of the natural intellect[?]; the infused gift of faith[?]; what[?]). But the project of filling out these specifics appears to me to be hopeful.<sup>7</sup> And the basic idea of *warrant by way of proper function* seems harmonious with many Christian traditions (it's implicit in, say, Aquinas, as Jenkins argues).

Second and relatedly, it might seem that faith is precisely *not* knowledge, because there is a sort of leap-in-the-dark aspect to it, or inconclusiveness about it. But much of the tension here, it seems to me, is linguistic and not substantial. Christians talk past each other. For example, Augustine “avoided the term *knowledge*” even for *historical* belief, in well-known writings on faith, in order to say that “belief, that is, faith, is a constituent part” of what a good head will accept.<sup>8</sup> Whether it's that Jesus is Lord or that Caesar crossed the Rubicon, “it is not proper, says Augustine, to say, ‘I *know* it;’ I can only say I *believe* it.”<sup>9</sup> So there's a surface-level conflict between what Augustine says and what Plantinga says, because Plantinga says we *know* that Jesus is Lord, and we know that Caesar crossed the Rubicon; we don't merely *believe* these things. Happily, the conflict here is superficial. Consider that Augustine himself later “changed his mind . . . about the appropriateness of the word *know*,” in order to respect “common usage.”<sup>10</sup> It's precisely common usage that epistemologists like Plantinga try to capture today, in analyzing what it is to “know” something as opposed to merely believing it without sufficient warrant. So the conflict between Plantinga and Augustine is superficial. So is what seems at first to be a tension between

7. See Jenkins, *Thomas Aquinas*; Mulder, *Kierkegaard*, 28–31.

8. Wilken, *Spirit*, 169.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

Plantinga and other eminent theologians (Kierkegaard, if anyone, would seem opposed).<sup>11</sup>

## 2. ON EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AS OPPOSED TO PROPOSITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

My 14-year old son Philip mused on a puzzle yesterday at dinner, which highlights the important difference between two types of knowledge. Isn't it strange, he remarked, that you might be struck, even surprised, how massive a whale is, when you see it, even if you didn't really *learn* anything new because you already *knew* the whale's massive dimensions before you *saw* it. You're awestruck as if you'd just learned something about how massive the whale is; but you didn't just learn it. This puzzling situation highlights the difference between two ways of knowing something: knowing it "experientially" and knowing it "propositionally" as it is sometimes put.

Experiential knowledge or understanding is important to have for reasons suggested by theologians from Augustine to Jonathan Edwards, John Henry Newman, and beyond.<sup>12</sup> Suppose, to take an extreme case, that I had *no* experiential knowledge about joy or happiness, having suffered through a uniformly drab life. Even so, "though I had never experienced a moment of happiness, I could nevertheless understand perfectly well what happiness is, even what a paradisaical life of complete happiness would be," purely propositionally: or anyway, it seems plausible to say so, following Matthews.<sup>13</sup> The reason that it seems plausible to say that I might understand, *propositionally*, what happiness is, is because I might be able to *define* 'happiness' and *use* the term sensibly, explaining people's behavior by reference to their pursuing "happiness," and so on. My *experiential* impoverishment—I have not gone *through* it—seems to issue in a corresponding but distinct *conceptual* impoverishment. We can easily imagine someone telling me, "You don't understand what I'm going through," in her times of

11. See Evans, "Kierkegaard"; on interpreting Aquinas harmoniously, see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 91n.

12. For secondary literature about Augustine's thoughts on experiential knowledge, see Matthews, *Augustine*, Chapter 15, "Happiness"; Edwards's thoughts on the matter are discussed by Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Chapter 9 (§2, "Jonathan Edwards"); Newman's thoughts on experiential understanding are discussed in several of John Crosby's 2011 lectures (see especially Lecture 1: "The Personalist Spirit of Newman's Thought," and Lecture 2: "Newman on the Human Person as a World of His Own.").

13. Matthews, *Augustine*, 143.

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joy. She might say that I don't know what it's *like* to be happy even though I know what happiness is.

My conceptual impoverishment would have *deleterious effects*. Perhaps the most substantial or salient effect of the conceptual impoverishment is that I would probably not have the understanding it takes to be *motivated* to do what I know, propositionally, that I ought to do, to be happy: from a Christian perspective, that would be to commit my life to Christ. Newman accordingly warns that “there cannot be a more fatal mistake than to suppose we see what the doctrine” of eternal joy in Christ “means as soon as we can use the words which signify it.” On the contrary, he insists, *experiential* understanding of doctrinal matters like this “is all one with being serious” about orienting our lives.<sup>14</sup>

So it seems fitting that Aquinas closely associates the highest *wisdom*, whereby we “judge and order” our lives and actions, with an “intimate”—I suggest *experiential*—comprehension of what the Divine ways are all about.<sup>15</sup> Aquinas juxtaposes the highest wisdom with merely propositional knowledge that any student of ethics might have “if he has learnt the science of morals.” That inferior sort of wisdom “which is acquired by the study and research of reason,” does not hold us back from sin. But the highest wisdom does. The highest wisdom is backed by a comprehension from the insider's perspective of an experiential union with God in the act of love, by means of which the agent “contemplates Divine things in themselves.”

From the outsider's merely speculative perspective, whereby we lack real appreciation of what they're really all about in spirit, “Divine rules” can appear to be cold and commanding fiats, instead of the benevolent directives of a solicitous nurse and lover. Merely being well *catechized* or *propositionally* sophisticated is not enough to lift us from this misunderstanding and thereby to give us “sympathy” for God's directives. Someone without the highest wisdom, who is nevertheless well-catechized, might say, in a manner of speaking, “I *know* these precepts are good for me but I just can't get myself to *believe* it!” The connection between an experiential–propositional distinction, on the one hand, and wisdom in living, on the other

14. Newman, “Immortality.”

15. Aquinas, *Summa*, 2a2ae.45, “The Gift of Wisdom.” Aquinas isn't directly addressing the topic of experiential understanding and his discussion does leave interpretive mysteries. I recall some years ago discussing this with Alfred Freddoso, who piqued my interest by his own searching into puzzles about why Aquinas would organize his *Summa*'s coverage of seven key virtues by putting the discussion of the highest wisdom under the topic of love, rather than prudence.

hand, sheds light on puzzling biblical pronouncements, such as “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:30). Jesus’s teachings are hard. Because the wise understand deeply the benevolent spirit behind divine commandments, it can be “sweet” for them to do what would otherwise be hard, as Aquinas says. Just so, if I have had first-hand experience of your kindness, it can be easy for me to do what you ask me to do, even if you can’t explain your reasons to me. Alternatively, if I’ve had first-hand experience with a miserable consequence, it can be easy for me to do what it takes to circumvent that outcome in the future, even if it means some effort on my part. After all, I can vividly imagine the troubles I will otherwise bring upon myself. Hence, imagination is closely associated in the literary tradition with what I’ve been calling “experiential knowledge.” As C.S. Lewis says in a related vein, “If the imagination were obedient, the appetites would give us very little trouble.”<sup>16, 17</sup>

The connection between an experiential/propositional distinction, on the one hand, and wisdom in living, on the other hand, also lends new dimensions to such readily understood pronouncements—understood at face value anyway—as, “thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes” (Matt 11:25). Sometimes it is *propositional* knowledge that separates the wise from children: hence, John Duns Scotus observes that Aristotle, for all his wisdom, had no information about the happiness “far more perfect than anything possible in this life,” because Aristotle didn’t know about Yahweh’s special revelation through the

16. Lewis, *Prayer*, 17. The connection between epistemology and motivation here is clearly of *practical* importance, but also has important *theoretical* applications. Thus, we sometimes hear that God might allow us to suffer so much in part, at least, because God knows that we *would* assent to going through with it if we were offered the opportunity. Here’s an interesting objection: saying that “Christians who suffer horrendously *would* have consented had they been asked for prospective consent” ignores that we “tend to weight temporally near effects over temporally distant effects and the aversion of harm over the procuring of greater goods” (Vitale, Review of *Wandering in Darkness*, 1196). True, we do. I suggest even so that perhaps we *would* assent if we *understood* better—intuitively, experientially—just what’s at *stake* with the choice (observe that understanding what’s at stake is anyway important to our *freely* choosing anything). As we anticipate the future, the vivid, experiential side to our understanding fades away. Newman says tellingly that “a sluggish will and a lukewarm love” might betray a myopic heart, which “cannot see afar off,” to the redemption of promises (Newman, “The Power of Will,” 353).

17. The connection between the imagination and experiential knowledge is not straightforward. Strictly speaking, one might *imagine* something that one’s had no first-hand *experience* with; on the other hand, one might consider even the *imagination’s* ability to bring *that very thing* to mind, a form of experience.

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prophets and Scriptures. Mere intelligence, which Aristotle had in plenty, isn't enough to learn anything about that kind of happiness. "From all this it is apparent how much thanks must be given to our Creator, who through faith has made us most certain of those things which pertain to our end and to eternal life—things about which the most learned and ingenious men can know almost nothing . . ." (I don't necessarily recommend Scotus to the uninitiated but some connections to experiential knowledge may be found in more accessible secondary literature).<sup>18</sup> Yet it is not always *propositional* knowledge that separates the learned from children. On the contrary, great propositional sophistication leaves room for a deeper, tacit understanding formed from experiential contact.

I close with three further insights that a firm grasp on the epistemological distinction between experiential and propositional knowledge promises to yield. First, the distinction seems crucial for understanding conceptual change and enlightenment. Our dim experiential contact with God now—"For now we see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor 13:12)—permits just so much experientially grounded vision about God and God's ways to whet our appetites. So our *longing* for, say, final happiness is on face value puzzling. "For who would want something of which he is unaware, or run after something he does not know?" as Boethius asks,<sup>19</sup> echoing forbears like Augustine, who worried, "How then shall I seek for the happy life?" Augustine never offers a settled response to the puzzle: "Certainly we have the desire for it, but how I do not know," he concedes.<sup>20</sup> But he hints that we understand *enough* experientially to long for the fulfillment of the God's promise.<sup>21</sup> Just so, if God's promises hold out, we will someday say, with a character in Lewis's stories, that we've received just what we've "believed in and longed for"—despite our gaps in understanding. Indeed, when you experience God's gift, you might characterize it as what "I have been looking for all of my life, though I never knew it till now."<sup>22</sup>

The *contrast* here to finding *what we were desiring all along* might be to this: receiving a conceptual *overhaul* so great that none of our experiences

18. Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, 162. For the uninitiated, see Mackey, "Singular and Universal."

19. Boethius, *Consolation*, 108.

20. Augustine, *Confessions*, 196.

21. The connections here to the ancient tradition of negative theology are rich but I leave the reader with only this prompt.

22. Lewis, *Last Battle*, 30, 196.

now provide enough grasp on what God promises even for us to be able to long for *them*—*themselves*—at all. That suggests unfortunately, as James Alison might say, something more like a diabolical cult’s “displacement of ‘self’” and all of its hopes and loves, than Christian redemption.<sup>23</sup> All of the conceptual groundwork that Augustine, Lewis, and Alison take for a *start* in our conceptual understanding of the kingdom of heaven, visible now in, say, a parent’s love for a child, would, instead, yield to something absolutely foreign, something that we will find to be unrecognizable (cf. Jesus’s indications that the kingdom is already in our midst [Luke 17:20f.], albeit in seed form [Matt 13:31–32; Mark 4:30–32; Luke 13:18–19]).<sup>24</sup>

One can understand the reluctance, on the part of some, to invite God to move them. They’re afraid to pray “Thy will be done.” To be sure, there is sin on our part, there is selfishness. But there may also be fear rooted in ignorance for which one is *not* culpable, ignorance stemming from experiential impoverishment, or from misleading experiential associations (imagine someone having had a bad experience with an earthly father),<sup>25</sup> etc., concerning what God or God’s invitation is like. Such ignorance should not be thought to be inexcusable on account of proper schooling in the faith, say; it is not, or not primarily, an ignorance of catechesis or a lack of other propositional sophistication. We know less about others’

23. Alison, *On Being Liked*, 143.

24. To be sure, there are opposing strains in the great theological traditions. I don’t mean to present the uncontroversial here; I only hope to present a possible take-home message, which I hope moves the reader. So I intend to present Aquinas under a favorable interpretation, as Aquinas himself presents his own forbears. I’ve filled in ellipses. Certain strains in Aquinas suggest, by contrast to my interpretation here, “that God’s goodness is different in kind from our own” (Harrison, “Animal Souls,” 533), so utterly different that we lack even an experiential *start* in understanding or intuiting the spirit behind divine law: in that case, we “should expect no more than oblivion, or considerably worse,” say, for a child who dies before baptism, even if that seems unjust to us. No *greater understanding of the circumstances*, say, would in that case help us; *only erasing and replacing our values*. Compare, by contrast, more recent Catholic tradition in the works of John Paul II (winsomely introduced by Robert Barron, “Hell is Crowded”). There is similar tension between some of Calvin’s proclamations and more moderating strains found in the Calvinist tradition (Harrison, “Animal Souls,” and Kolokowski “Is God Happy?” discuss parallels between Calvinism and Catholicism here).

25. See Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 216n. Related mishaps are many and varied: another example would be to think propositionally that certain experientially understood features of fun—like its risk, as in skiing—would *have* to attend fun. This mistake might come from limits to our range of fun experiences. We might thereby conclude that heaven would be boring: for a quick, intuitive, sympathetic account of that way of thinking about the afterlife, see Baggini’s, *The Pig That Wants*.

## AT THE INTERSECTION

experiential blindspots in moral and spiritual matters than we do about their propositional deficiencies, which are easier to discern in discussion: so we should take care not to assign personal blame lightly. Compare Jesus's warnings against judging others (Matt 7:1; Luke 6:37) and his statement of forgiveness on the cross: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34; see also Acts 3:17).

There are many further applications of the experiential/propositional distinction at hand, many of which have practical interest. Teaching and preaching come especially to mind. The epistemological distinction at hand suggests the urgency of making truths manifest by way of a battery of conduits, in order to help the listener to unpack experientially the rich content of verbal articulation, the whole relevance of which can be otherwise missed. Consider the importance of personal *relationships* in mentoring, by which we may express our thought with gestures and nonverbal cues. Consider the value of *beauty* in liturgy or art to convey sublimity. These are nonverbal conduits. *Verbal* communication, too, can be more or less experiential: the personal touch in story-telling and concrete narrative can effectively illustrate philosophical and theological truths (here see Stump's arguments concerning the problem of evil).<sup>26</sup> A proper understanding of the experiential/propositional distinction upgrades these distinct avenues of communication as concomitants to the teaching of doctrine, which is of course propositionally conveyed as well.

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26. Stump, *Wandering*.

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